

STATEMENT OF SENATOR GORDON H. SMITH

U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging

“Serving Patriots and Heroes: Ensuring Health and Healing for our Nation’s Veterans”

July 3, 2007

Good morning and thank you for being here today.

I am so glad that we could be here in Oregon this afternoon to discuss this critical issue facing our nation’s veterans. I also want to thank Senator Wyden, who also sits on the Senate Special Committee on Aging, for joining me. I know that these issues are important to him and I appreciate his participation.

Ensuring proper physical and mental health care for our nation’s veterans, both young and old, is essential. In addition to the work we will do here today, I also will be meeting with facility and community mental health professionals as well as veterans’ advocates at the VA facility in White City on Thursday. I will use the information we gather today and Thursday to hold a follow up hearing in Washington, DC later this summer so that my colleagues in Congress also can benefit from the expertise and recommendations that come from this week’s events.

While we hear many news reports on the mental state of new veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan – which I believe our government must do a better job to address – we cannot forget the mental healthcare needs of our aging veterans.

What we now refer to as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), was once described as “soldier’s heart” in the Civil War, “shell shock” in World War I, and “combat fatigue” in World War II. Whatever the name, they are serious mental illnesses and deserve equal attention and care as a physical wound.

In recent reports, we have heard that 20 to 40 servicemen and women are evacuated each month from Iraq due to mental health problems. In addition to those who are identified, there are many more who will return home after their service to face re-adjustment challenges. Some will need appropriate mental health care to help them adjust back to “normal” life. While others will need medical assistance to heal more serious PTSD issues. Yet others will need help to mentally cope with their physical wounds.

A system must be in place to help our veterans as they adjust back to life with their families and within their communities. I have introduced the “Heroes Helping Heroes Act” in the Senate this year to provide funding for peer support programs so that trained veterans can help returning veterans navigate the sometimes perilous adjustment process.

So many of our veterans from previous conflicts, such as World War II, and the Korean, and Vietnam Wars, needed similar programs once they returned home. Yet, I fear that we didn’t do

enough to help them. With proper and early supports systems in place, we can work to prevent the more serious and chronic mental health issues that come from a lack of intervention.

I also look forward to working with my colleague Senator Wyden on developing legislation to help combat the problems that we see plaguing our mental health system for veterans. I look forward to working with the VA as well as the veterans' service organizations, community groups and, most importantly, veterans themselves to develop thoughtful legislation that ensures not only new veterans are being served, but those who served us in the past are not forgotten.

Recent reports, including a thoughtful and informative series done by the Washington Post, have highlighted ways we can and must improve the current mental health system for our veterans. Lack of culturally sensitive mental health professionals, inability to reach rural areas, stigma within the military, bureaucratic run-arounds, and long waiting times are just a few of the problems that we hear about – both in the news and directly from constituents. These are problems that must be addressed and can only be addressed if we all work together to find solutions.

I also am anxiously awaiting the report from the President's Commission on Care for America's Returning Wounded Warriors chaired by former Senator and World War II veteran, Bob Dole, and former Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, Donna Shalala.

In March of this year, I sent a letter to the Commission asking that they give an equal review of mental health services as they do for physical health services. With the report expected to come out in mid-July, I hope that we can use their recommendations for thoughtful improvement to the VA and their mental health services. I hope that the Commission recognizes that we cannot afford another generation of soldiers who lack appropriate supports for health and healing of their physical and mental wounds.

The Senate Special Committee on Aging has a long and distinguished history of leading the Senate on issues of great importance to our aging population. We have an opportunity today to focus the on-going and critical needs of our new and aging veterans and their mental health needs.

As our country faces new waves of veterans with mental health illnesses, many of whose issues arise from combat stress, we must ensure that we learn from the lessons of the past. We must ensure that they are cared for, and we must not leave behind those who fought for our nation in previous generations.

I now turn to Senator Wyden for his opening remarks.

